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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a model for a literacy program proposed for the Rural Education Project at Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville. The program would target unemployed adults, at-risk youth and others in a seven-county target area whose lack of reading skills hampers their search for employment. The model calls for cooperative efforts among the university, area school systems, and other community agencies. The literacy program would link up with community education programs, including those that offer adult basic education, job related skills training and vocational education. Components would include dropout prevention, basic skills, higher-order thinking skills, telephone hot-lines for homework assistance and increased access to college for low-income rural students. The literacy program would also encourage parent involvement through the use of newsletters, school produced videotapes, and telephone hot-lines for parents. The Rural Education Project proposes to raise literacy rates by identifying other successful programs, linking college faculty with local school personnel, and tapping into other community resources. The project would provide training, some means of program assessment, and a method for disseminating information among schools. Project personnel established fund-raising goals and planned to assist local officials in application for additional funding. A successful literacy project, the paper concludes, would result in lower dropout rates, more adults completing high school equivalency tests, and more involvement in education by adults. (TES)

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# A UNIVERSITY-BASED MODEL FOR LITERACY ENHANCEMENT THROUGH RURAL SCHOOLS

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A UNIVERSITY-BASED MODEL FOR

LITERACY ENHANCEMENT THROUGH RURAL SCHOOLS

If the rural schools of the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee are to become optimally effective, the educational aspirations of the communities served and the resources available to the schools must be increased. Each of these factors is directly related to the levels of literacy of students, teachers and adults who are parents and community members.

The Rural Education Project at Tennessee Technological University proposes to initiate a major thrust in literacy enhancement through the rural schools of the Upper Cumberland. The plan or model is in the process of developing as a variety of persons representing schools, agencies, communities, the University, business and industry provide input into needs and probable solutions.

The Model

As currently envisioned, the Literacy Enhancement Through Rural Schools model will be two dimensional, conceptual and operational.

Conceptually, scholars have not reached agreement on what precisely constitutes adult literacy. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, promoters of the adult literacy programs defined literacy as the ability to read simple sentences, road signs, instructions in agricultural bulletins, and to sign ones own name. Today, literacy is often defined as functional literacy, i.e., the level of reading and writing

proficiency to fill out job applications, calculate interest, and secure and hold a job in a high-tech society. As such, functional literacy includes more than reading and writing skills; it also includes mathematical, computer, and critical thinking skills. The target adult population in literacy programs thus includes two groups, the unemployed and the employed who, though they can perform adequately in their present job, would be hampered in finding employment due to lack of literacy skills should their present position be terminated. At-risk youth constitute another target population.

If the problems of literacy are to been addressed, it is necessary to provide targeted help for the at-risk populations to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to develop the varied literacy skills necessary for full and effective participation in our society, and to modify our approaches to education so that all children learn to reason more effectively about what they read and write and to analyze, elaborate upon, and extend ideas.

Several questions remain to be resolved relative to functional literacy. One is the target population itself. What consitutes functional literacy depends, in part, on the job requirements which vary within industries and within different regions of the country. Another problem is the lack of agreement on how to measure functional literacy, be it the completion of a certain grade level in school, a standardized proficiency test or the successful completion of the GED.

The solutions to these problems are based in the history, traditions, and cultures of the populations to be served. The analysis of these populations, theorizing about what should and should not be effective, and describing the impacts of programs on individuals and groups are tasks of the scholar. The University community includes a number of faculty with expertise and experience in education psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and other disciplines who can contribute to the conceptual understanding of literacy enhancement in a rural area such as the Upper Cumberland.

Operationally, the model involves cooperative efforts with area schools and school systems within the Upper Cumberland and a variety of public and private agencies having compatible goals. For the purposes of this project, the Upper Cumberland is defined as the fourteen counties in the Upper Cumberland Development District and the other counties served by Tennessee Tech. These other counties include Trousdale, Bledsoe, Sequatchie, Morgan, Scott, Roane and Grundy. From a practical standpoint, the greater the proximity of a school to the Tennessee Tech campus, the easier program implementation tends to be.

As presently envisioned, the Literacy Enhancement Through Rural Schools will have three primary foci. However, many projects will combine elements of more than one focus. These three foci are:

Literacy Enhancement Through Community Education. This will include but not be limited to programs in adult basic education,

job-related skills training, vocational training, and leisure activity training each of which has a strong literacy component. For example, the idea of establishing computer classes using equipment available in public schools to train adults in the use of computers through software that also teaches basic literacy skills is being explored.

Literacy Enhancement Through Drop-out Prevention. The surest way to solve the literacy problem in the long run is to keep students in school until they qualify for high school graduation. With a drop-out rate of approximately 30 percent between the ninth grade and high school graduation, the Upper Cumberland region is ripe for drop-out prevention programs. Some of the strategies which have been found to be successful elsewhere and which are being explored include mastery learning programs in basic skills, higher order thinking skills programs, telephone hot-lines for homework assistance, increasing student involvement in non-academic school activities, providing work scholarships to students who do not have the financial resources to be a part of the peer culture, and increasing college access for the poor rural student.

Literacy Enhancement Through Parent and Community Involvement in Schools. When parents are involved in full partnership with schools, academic achievement rises, attendance becomes more regular, and community support is gained. The first step is good school-home communications. Some strategies being explored for initiating and improving these communications are

telephone hot-lines for parents, newsletters, school-produced video-tapes to explain the school program to parents, and increasing adult access to the school facilities and personnel in non-threatening ways.

In addition to communication, parents and other adults in the community can be served by schools in such a way that literacy skills are gained through programs which also teach skills. The need to preserve the adult's self-esteem and publically perceived status cannot be forgotten. These programs might include parent training for employment in the schools as aides, classes and other activities for young parents and parents of pre-schoolers (particularly the at-risk pre-schooler), and assistance for teen-age parents who wish to return to school, Fostering of interagency cooperation in local schools and the direct involvement of business, industry, and community groups in schools can also increase school access. Again, each of these projects would have a major literacy component.

The University's Role

The proposed model for Literacy Enhancement Through Rural Schools is consistent with three of the goals of Tennessee Tech:

1. To provide opportunities for conducting research, will be supported by funds from both internal and external sources;

2. To help meet local needs by working closely with the various elements of the surrounding community in providing continuing education for adults, cultural programs for the community, educated manpower for local employers, and faculty-student involvement in community service activities;

3. To provide public service by working with governmental agencies in social and environmental policy formation, assisting in finding the solutions to major problems, aiding persons from disadvantaged backgrounds, and being responsive to regional and national priorities in planning educational programs.

Providing direct assistance to the rural schools of the Upper Cumberland to increase their effectiveness is a mission which Tennessee Tech has accepted and delegated in part to the Rural Education Project. If students from the rural Upper Cumberland are to meet entrance requirements at Tennessee Tech and are to succeed in college, they must remain in school and their public school experiences must prepare them to compete against students from more affluent communities having higher educational levels and aspirations. To ensure this, the quality of schooling must increase and this can happen only if local communities become more literate and valuing of formal education.

The Rural Education Project is in its fourth year of working with selected rural schools in the identification of needs and the design, implementation and evaluation of programs to address those needs. The Project has demonstrated that a higher education based program can work effectively with public schools and has developed mechanisms for operationalizing efforts. The Project has also documented the major needs of rural schools in the Upper Cumberland and identified literacy enhancement as a necessary part of the solution.

Specifically, the Rural Education Project proposes to enhance literacy through rural schools using the following

mechanisms:

Identification of Successful Programs. There are many successful programs already in place in the schools of the Upper Cumberland and other rural schools. Our task is to identify these programs, study them to determine why they work, publicize them to schools with similar needs, and assist in transplanting these programs. In some cases, existing programs may need consultive or financial assistance to achieve success.

Cooperative Program Initiation. The Rural Education Project director will serve as the liaison between University faculty and local school personnel. Some programs will be cooperatively developed; some will be devised by the school personnel and supported by the Rural Education Project; others will be devised by University faculty and accepted by school personnel. In all cases, programs receiving consultive and/or financial support will be cooperatively implemented with the local school personnel directing the programs with University assistance.

Networking. The Rural Education Project is in a unique position to bring together various persons of expertise from a variety of public and private agencies and to access information not generally available. This networking or linking function enables literacy enhancement initiatives to utilize multiple resources and to interface with one another.

Program Design and Implementation. The University faculty who will be participating in the design of literacy enhancement programs have a level of expertise and experience not generally

available to school systems which cannot afford outside consultants. The Rural Education Project provides the mechanism for faculty to engage in school-based project design within the University reward system.

Training. If the literacy enhancement initiatives are to be effective, they must be directed and implemented by local personnel. The proper role of the University is to provide the training which these personnel need in order to carry out the designated tasks.

Evaluation. School systems tend to implement programs and then determine their success informally using subjective indicators. If programs are to be transferable, the extent of their success or failure, the reasons for the results, and (if possible) the factors contributing to relative success or failure must be identified. By including program evaluation as a part of the design, monitoring the evaluation process, and analyzing and interpreting the resulting data, University faculty can assist local school personnel in program modifications to increase the likelihood of program success and provide the information needed for other school systems to determine if a program might work for them.

Dissemination. One of the roles of the Rural Education Project is the dissemination of information among rural schools and to other rural education centers across the nation. Through presentations, publications, consultant work, and informal

networking the findings from Literacy Enhancement Through Rural Schools can be shared.

Funding. The Rural Education Project can serve as a flow-through funding agency for a variety of programs in rural schools. A three-year goal of raising $250,000 from public, private, and governmental sources for Literacy Enhancement Through Rural Schools has been established. Private donations will be handled through the College of Education Foundation. Governmental or foundation grants will be handled through the College of Education and University budget process in restricted accounts. All outside monies will be used and accounted for within the guidelines of the funder and the business management policies and procedures of Tennessee Tech to support a variety of projects throughout the Upper Cumberland.

In addition, the Rural Education Project will assist school personnel in the identification and application for additional funds. For example, the Rural Education Project assisted Jackson County Schools in applying for $20,000 from the Appalachian Regional Commission to begin a drop-out prevention program at Fox Elementary School. The Rural Education Project is providing a consultant and other assistance for the program which began in August.

## Intended Outcomes

Literacy Enhancement Through Rural Schools should benefit a variety of persons. These outcomes will vary from project to project but should all contribute to the major goal of increasing

rural school effectiveness by enhancing the literacy of the community. Specific benefits which may be expected are:

1. More adults entering and completing GED programs.
2. More adults engaging in community education activities at rural schools including vocationally related skills development.
3. More adults participating in school-sponsored activities.
4. More adults involved with rural schools during the school day.
5. A decrease in the drop-out rate.
6. An increase in the number of students involved in non-academic school activities.
7. An increase in student scores on college admission criteria.
8. Increased financial support for schools.
9. Increased school-community communication and interaction.
10. Validation of successful programs for adoption elsewhere.
11. Scholarly presentations and publications that add to the store of knowledge in literacy enhancement.
12. Positive public relations for Tennessee Tech and the various sponsors of the program.